

The Life of Amy Beatrice Carmichael—Love to Live, Live to Love

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It has been a tradition on the first Sunday of November—after all Saints Day—to look at a noteworthy Christian from the past—someone who stands out. This year it's Amy Carmichael. I was drawn to her life through the lives of Jim and Elizabeth Elliott—missionaries who reached the Aucas in the 50's through death and courage. Three years ago I was reading the Elliott's books. And in them Amy Carmichael's name kept coming up. I thought, "I've got to read this lady. Elizabeth Elliott, whom I greatly respect, refers to Amy as her "first spiritual mother" (Elliott, *A Chance to die—The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael*, p. 15). So I started reading Amy's books and discovered something refreshing and wonderful. I was so excited that I went into Deanna my wife and said, "Babe, I've fallen in love with another woman...but you don't need to worry because she's dead!" (I know...I have a twisted sense of humor. I wouldn't ever recommend leading with that, guys!)

But I have to say that I see a sovereign convergence this year. I've been planning this for some time. Meanwhile, God has been moving in the hearts of some of our younger families toward the support of and even the adoption of orphans. So there's this growing inward burden for this group, which we know our Father has a heart for (one strand). It just so happens that today, November 4th, has been reserved by some as Orphan Sunday—a time for churches for focus on the plight of orphans around the world (in my thinking the category of orphans would include the foster children and the unborn who are terminated in the womb). That's strand two. And wouldn't you know it, Amy is known most for her work in India among orphans (strand three). God, in a way that only he can do, is bringing these strands together. It *suggests* a "moving."

So let me introduce you to Amy Beatrice Carmichael as best I can in the short time we have. I will but scratch the surface, so I commend anything she's written for you to read. Here is a sketch of her life along with some of the rich lessons that we can take away.

First, if I was to encapsulate her life in a passage of Scripture, I would probably choose Ephesians 5:1-2, which reads:

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 5:1-2)

If love is the chief way in which we imitate God, and the measure of that love is the sacrificial life of Jesus, then Amy Carmichael was an imitator of God. Love was central—but it was love that was willing to die daily for the sake of others. Her motto was, "Love to live, live to love" (Elliott, p. 242). Here is her story.

The Life of Amy Carmichael

She was born in Ireland on December 16th, 1867 to well-to do parents, who were Christians. She was educated in a Wesleyan boarding school in her teens where she experienced her conversion at the age of 13. At the age of 18 her father passed away leaving them in financial distress. As a result, they moved to Belfast, where young Amy was exposed to the slums and the young girls who were forced to work in the factories and mills. The conditions were horrible. Moved by the sight, she began a ministry to these young girls and would bring

them from the slums to a prayer meeting that she initiated. The church people weren't used to commoners in their facilities—not so well-mannered girls—forcing them to find another venue. Amy prayed for land and a building in which these girls could meet—where she could minister to them (mind you, she was 21 years old when she did this). God answered her prayers and she acquired both a building and land in which to minister). Absolute dependence upon the Lord's provision and prayer were core to her life. The year was 1888.

To give you a sense of her work ethic, here is a schedule of ministry that was done in this newly acquired building:

Sunday 4:30	Bible Class
Sunday 5:30	Sunbeam Band Meeting
Monday 7:30	Singing Practice
Tuesday 7:30	Night School
Wednesday 7:30	Girl's Meeting
Thursday 7:30	Sewing Club
Monday and Friday 1:20	Dinner Hour Meeting
Wednesday 1:20	Dinner Prayer Meeting
Thursday 4:00	Mother's meeting

She became involved in the Keswick Movement, which was a blend of Wesleyan holiness, American revivalism and Calvinism. It is there that she would hear D.L. Moody preach on the prodigal son and see tears in his eyes when he talked about God's immeasurable love for his people.

In 1892 she heard a clarion call to missions. She heard the words "Go Ye" repeatedly. She had a strong sense of the dynamic and personal leading from the Holy Spirit. At the age of 24 she went to Japan as a missionary. It proved difficult—the language and the dysfunctional missionary community. She got really sick and by went back to England by way of China and Sri Lanka. From England she was commissioned to become a missionary to India. She arrived in India in 1895.

It took her a while to find out where she fit. She met a missionary family who would be an important piece in her life—the Walker family. With the Walker family she participated in an itinerate gospel ministry to the villages and towns on the southern tip of India. The attitude of this family and Amy was, "How much can I do without that I may have more to give?"

Then came an event in 1901 that would change her life and seal her call. She met a little seven-year-old girl—named Preena. She was an escapee from one of the Hindu Temples. (At that time, the Hindu Temples had temple prostitutes.) This little girl was sold by her mother to the Temple to become a prostitute. She tried to escape twice but was caught, brought back and beaten and branded with hot irons. The third time she escaped she was brought to Amy. This little girl was the beacon of need that captured her heart. For the next 50 years in Southern India, Amy would give herself to saving these girls and the babies that were born to the prostitutes.

Through prayer and provision, she started a fellowship called the Dohnavur Fellowship. They acquired land, which served as a refuge for these girls, and later boys too were added (in 1918). She was resolved to remain unmarried—a resolve that would remain true to the end of her life. Jesus was her Lord and her kids were her family. She placed such great weight upon the idea of family that she refused to call her ministry an institution. It was always a "family."

Life in the orphanage—as you can imagine—was anything but glamorous or easy. Their days consisted of educating, bathing infants, caring for infants, cleaning, cooking, feeding, providing spiritual instruction, discipline, clothing, caring for them when they got sick, changing diapers. She struggled to learn the language. Because of her radical commitment to the Lord, she was often spoken ill of by other missionaries, harassed by outsiders, misunderstood by her people in England—sometimes verbally attacked. She had to deal with inner conflict as well between people who worked on her team. They had tragic experiences with disease. One time 16 babies got dysentery and ten of them died. Death was constant. She was committed to being very honest about the difficulties of missionary life. No rose-colored glasses.

In 1931 Amy had a tragic accident. She walked into a newly constructed house where she stumbled into a pit, dislocated her ankle, broke her leg and twisted her spine. As a result she would be bedridden for the rest of her life—the next 20 years. During that time she would fall again while walking to the bathroom breaking her arm and fracturing her femur. She suffered arthritis, neuritis, and cystitis. Yet, even in her bedridden state, she led the Dohnavur Fellowship with meetings and direction. She wrote books from her bed, personal letters of encouragement by the thousands. Even when she couldn't write with her hand she resorted to dictation. She simply wouldn't stop. If she hadn't been bed-ridden, we wouldn't have many of the books or the quality of reflection that her bed-ridden years produced. Like Paul's prison, which served as the forum for his many New Testament letters, so her bed became the forum for her words. In the end she wrote 35 books. After 51 years without a single furlough (she never returned to England), she died on January 18, 1951 at the age of 83 years old. Her race had been run. And thousands of lives would be changed forever. And to this day, the Dohnavur Fellowship remains—carrying on her legacy of carrying for orphans, led by the very people she rescued.

That's her life in a nutshell. Like I said, read her biography if you want more!

The Lessons from Amy Carmichael's life

So what can we take from her life? This is very difficult to distill down, but let me give you what I thought were the main take-aways. Let's start with her center.

1. *The Source: The fountain of her strength, encouragement, resolve and endurance was an intimate communion with Jesus.*

One thing I have found a constant among those who have run the race with a great sense of sacrifice and resolve is that the power to do so sprung from a constant, intimate and very real communion with the Lord. Listen to her words:

Dear, you are coming to a battlefield. You cannot spend too much time with Him alone....So few are willing to pay the price of the knowledge of God" (Elliott, p. 304).

Comrades in this solemn fight—this awful conflict with awful powers—let us settle it as something that cannot be shaken: We are here to live holy, loving, lowly lives. We cannot do this unless we walk very, very close to our Lord Jesus. Anything that would hinder us from the closest walk that is possible to us till we see him face to face is not for us. (Carmichael, *God's Missionary* p. 16).

If you stay your soul on God, nothing can keep you from that clearness of spirit which is life and peace. In that stillness you will know what His will is. Strength and calm will come to do it." (Carmichael, *Candles in the Dark* p. 53)

Elliott on Amy: “Experience had quickly taught her that she could not survive the storms without the anchor of the constraining love of Christ and what she called the “Rock-consciousness” of the promise given her, ‘he goeth before’” (Elliott, p. 94)

So first, give much time to quietness. We have to get our help for the most part direct from our God. We are here to help, not to be helped, and we must each one of us learn to walk with God alone and feed on His word so as to be nourished. Don’t only read and pray; listen. And don’t evade the slightest whisper of guidance that comes. God make you very sensitive, and very obedient” (Carmichael, *Candles* p. 17)

The point is that she understood what it meant to abide in the vine. To do any work for God—and all life is to be lived for God—your first order of business is to be so completely connected to Jesus—his love, his sovereign power and his cross. It was the engine that kept her going in India for 56 years—even from her bed for 20 years. Our source of strength comes from the same fountain—real, consistent and intimate communion with Jesus.

2. *Resolve: She was resolved to keep the main thing the main thing without compromise.*

You easily get the sense when you read her biographies that she was stubborn--like a steel wall, bull-headed. Only her stubbornness was in the right place. If you’re going to be stubborn, be stubborn for what matters. Her resolved center was the glory of Jesus and the souls of those she served. Elliott’s summary of her main aim was:

To have a ‘single eye’ for the glory of God. Whatever might blur the vision of God had been given her of His work, whatever could distract or deceive or tempt others to seek anything but the Lord Jesus Himself she tried to eliminate. Why waste precious time, painful effort on lesser things?” (Elliott, p. 84).

She had little use for missionaries who weren’t all in. She wrote:

O to be delivered from half-hearted missionaries! Don’t come if you mean to turn aside for anything—for the ‘claims of society’ in the treaty ports and stations. Don’t come if you haven’t made up your mind to live for one thing—the winning of souls” (Elliott, p. 142)

The devil does not care how many hospitals we build, any more than he cares how many schools and colleges we put up, if only he can pull our ideas down, and sidetrack us on to anything of any sort except the living of holy, loving, humble lives, and the bringing of men, women, and children to know our Lord Jesus Christ not only as Savior but as Sovereign Lord” (Elliott, p. 291)

You might think this is good for a missionary but not the ordinary teacher, contractor, stay at home mom. I think that’s where we’re wrong. Most of her daily life was spent cleaning kids, teaching to read, managing people and so forth. Most of her life was spent doing the mundane just like us. But she understood what her life was about. It was about Jesus and souls. That’s the call of every Christian. It’s what Paul called all Christians to in Rome---to offer their bodies as living sacrifices unto God. Do we know what our center is? Whether we’re tutoring kids, flipping burgers or going to class—it’s about the glory of Jesus and the souls of people.

3. *Confidence: The source of her intense prayer life was her deep confidence in the Lord’s assured provision.*

Another interesting feature of her life was an intense commitment to prayer. She prayed for a building and property and God provided—over and over again. She prayed for two doctors and hospital building and God provided—without even making the need known.

The Dohnavur family believed that:

We have one crystal clear reason apart from the blessed happiness of this way of life. It is this: prayer is the core of our day. Take prayer out, and the day would collapse, would be pithless, a straw blown in the wind” (Carmichael, *Roots*, p 55).

And when it came to financial support, her reliance was upon the Lord. And it was radical. For example, she was fundamentally opposed to soliciting money from unbelievers. Her reasoning? She questioned, “Is the work for which we want the money God’s chosen work for us, or our chosen work for him? If the former, will not He see after the money necessary?” She simply took Jesus at his Word: “Ask, and ye shall receive,” and “My God shall supply all her need” (Elliott, p. 48). On one occasion she wrote, “Satan is so much more in earnest than we are—he buys up the opportunity while we are wondering how much it will cost” (Elliott, p. 85). Her life and legacy proved that God did provide without ever having to market herself—which she was viciously opposed to.

Elliott wrote that on one July during World War II, when finances were scarce, “In July there was a four-thousand Rupee deficit. But when did Amy Carmichael ever operate on the basis of mere business sense? This, she declared, was ‘the very time to look for an advance’” (Elliott, p. 310). All of this...she prayed for. But underneath her fervent praying was a solid confidence that God would provide.

That’s convicting. Lack of prayer betrays our lack of confidence in God’s provision. We don’t fail to pray because we fail to try...we fail to pray because we fail to *believe*! Prayer is the evidence of what you really believe about God. All Amy’s eggs were on God’s provision. Her life proves that he is the faithful provider—without gimmicks or schmoozy fundraisers. Elliott summed it up saying, “She would not mention a need to any but God until it had been met” (Elliott, p. 153).

4. *Discernment: The importance of discerning and disciplining one’s life toward that which edifies not empties.*

Another important lesson that I’ve taken away from her is the importance of discerning activities that edify versus empty. She wrote about it often.

We are variously made. What rests one person wearies another. The great thing is to find what rests us most, what sends us back to our work most truly strengthened and refreshed in body, soul and spirit.” (Carmichael, *Missionary* p. 45)

Even things like recreation were only good if they generated strength rather than leak it out. About recreation she said that recreation was good if it was for “re-equipment for future work with no leakage of spiritual power” (Carmichael, *Missionary* 37).

Can you tell which activities leak spiritual energy and what activities fuel spiritual energy? Her path was to discipline herself toward that which filled her with grace—not depleted

it. That's great advice for us too. Eliminate the things that dampen your passion and fill your life with the things that fill you with a greater sense of God.

5. *Family: She was deeply committed to principles of love that promotes and preserves family.*

How and what one communicates is vital to family. She had a five-fold filter that her words were passed through: Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Does it have the "Seed of eternity" in it? Imagine if those five rules were to guard our mouths as a family! I dare say the family would be far healthier.

As said earlier, she refused see her fellowship as an institution. The people she worked with know that the team was about "Following the crucified; loyalty towards one another; continuing to be a family, not an institution..." (Elliott. P. 254)

At the core of all of this was love, confidence in God's love for her, her love for God and what it means to love others sacrificially. Consider these final quotes:

If this were the last time I could speak to you I should say just these words, "Beloved, let us love, O let us love. We perish if we do not love. Let us love." (Elliott, p. 352)

Ours should be the love that asks not "How little" but 'How much'; the love that pours out its all and revels in the joy of having something to pour on the feet of its beloved; love that laughs at limits—rather, does not see them, would not heed them if it did. (Carmichael, *Missionary* p. 34)

Love is the answer to all things: love ends all questions. Lord, ever more give us this love. (Carmichael, *Missionary* p. 58)

Lives like this aren't meant to make us all missionaries. But they are meant to cause pause, reflection and change. The point is not for us all to start orphanages per se, but to learn what it means to be truly Christian. Her life causes me pause. Have I settled into the Christian flow? I think her life can serve as a course correction for those of us who find ourselves largely living for ourselves rather than living for others. To be an imitator of God means we give ourselves up for other—especially those who are in the clutches of evil. That's God's heart! Amy reflected that self-sacrificing love to every end. If God's heart lives in us (his Spirit) then we likewise will self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Perhaps the Lord will move your heart to get involved. Don't sit idle, but let God's heart out in your life. Maybe it means getting involved in supporting HIV babies in Sub-Saharan Africa—the babies no one wants. Maybe it's closer to home by supporting and working in the Alpha Resource center as a counselor or nurse. Maybe it's in a classroom. The need is everywhere. There's this little boy that has been in my youngest son's class for two years now. During his kindergarten year he barely showed up to class...and when he did it was in a cab. His family life is shredded. Now he's in first grade...some days he lays his head on his desk in silence. At other times the little boy comes out. As a result of the chaos in his family, he can barely read. Imagine...a Christian saying, "That little boy needs my help! I'll show up at his class and help him learn to read." It's things like that, which are God-like. Something Amy would do.